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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000933

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN HAMPERING CABINET FORMATION

REF: BEIRUT 884

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The cabinet formation process, in its fifth week of negotiations, is stalled primarily due to Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun,s insistence on getting one of the four sovereign, or key, ministries (Defense, Interior, Finance, Foreign Affairs) for his own bloc. Aoun blames the delay on Prime Minister-designate Fouad Siniora and has called for his resignation; Siniora refused. Opposition contacts admit Aoun is the most strident voice preventing agreement, but hint that the majority wants to go slow on cabinet formation in order to hold off parliamentary action on an electoral law that, they say, might disadvantage the majority in the 2009 election. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Consultations to form a new cabinet were put on hold while Prime Minister-designate Fouad Siniora attended the June 23 Nahr al-Barid reconstruction conference in Vienna. Siniora is now back in Beirut, but our contacts do not think the cabinet will be formed this week. Contacts in the majority cite as the roadblock the opposition,s stance regarding the distribution of the four sovereign, or key, portfolios: Defense, Interior, Finance, and Foreign Affairs. Siniora,s draft cabinet proposal, submitted to President Michel Sleiman and Speaker Nabih Berri on June 8 (reftel), gave the Defense and Interior ministries to President Sleiman, and allocated one of the two remaining sovereign ministry slots to the majority and one to the opposition.

¶3. (C) Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun is fighting for a sovereign ministry for his bloc. It is widely assumed that his opposition allies, Shia-led Hizballah and Amal, will appoint a Shia if the opposition is granted one sovereign ministry. For Aoun to have a sovereign ministry, then, Hizballah/Amal would have to agree not to appoint one of their candidates and allow Aoun to appoint his, but that scenario could mean three of the sovereign ministries are held by Christians. Hizballah and Amal are unlikely to accept this. Another alternative is to give the opposition two of the four sovereign ministries, one for the Shia and one for Aoun, an option which the majority will not accept.

AOUN CALLS FOR
SINIORA,S RESIGNATION

¶4. (C) In an interview with pro-opposition Al Akhbar

newspaper, Aoun charged Siniora was obstructing agreement on a cabinet and called for Siniora to step down and for the President to designate someone else to form a cabinet. Siniora replied that he will not relinquish his responsibility to form the new cabinet or adhere to any deadline for completing his work. &The Prime Minister-designate was appointed by the majority and as long as the majority keeps its confidence in the Prime Minister-designate, then all talks about deadlines are nonsense,8 he stated.

ELIAS MURR,S NOMINATION
NOT THE OBSTACLE

15. (C) Aoun insists that he does not object to caretaker Defense Minister Elias Murr,s reappointment as Defense Minister by President Michel Sleiman, but that Murr is not independent and should be counted as one of March 14's ministers even if he is appointed by the President.

BERRI TRYING TO FIND COMPROMISE

16. (C) Figures close to March 8 essentially admitted to us that the demands of their ally Aoun are the major obstacle to reaching agreement on a cabinet, but they defend their support of him. Everyone is looking at the 2009 elections and realizes that the Christian vote will be decisive, so the Shia opposition want to keep the Christian Aoun with them, explained Shia MP Yassine Jabr, who is allied with Speaker Berri. MP Ali Bazzi from Berri's Amal party said Berri has

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been trying to offer compromise solutions, such as designating the Telecommunications Ministry as sovereign and giving it to Aoun, or allowing Aoun to name the deputy prime minister, a strictly honorific position without any power. But Siniora and March 14 have said no to these ideas, Bazzi said. Both MPs said Aoun is fighting hard on this issue now so that he is seen as the leading representative of Christian interests in the 2009 election.

OPPOSITION LEADERS TRADE
SHIA AND CHRISTIAN SEATS

17. (C) Press reported on a meeting held on June 20 between Speaker Nabih Berri, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, Aoun and former Minister Suleiman Franjiyeh. Ali Hamdan, Speaker Berri,s advisor, confirmed to us on June 24 that the meeting indeed took place and was aimed at facilitating the cabinet formation. Hamdan said that the opposition leaders agreed to a trade in portfolios amongst themselves wherein Amal and Hizballah agreed to give one of the six Shia seats to Aoun, so that Aoun would name a minister but that person would be a Shia. In return, Aoun would give Hizballah/Amal one of his Christian seats for those parties to name a Christian cabinet member. We understand that Aoun rejected this because he wants his designee to be a Christian.

RUMORS OF PROPOSED
MINISTERS

18. (C) Rumors circulating regarding portfolio appointments include Amal,s desire to have caretaker Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh remain in his position. Aoun has suggested that President Sleiman appoint a Christian and a Muslim to the defense and interior portfolios; we know that Sleiman wants to appoint Christians to both. While Sleiman's preference for Elias Murr to stay on as Defense Minister is well known, he has been much more cautious regarding his preferences for Interior. Names we have heard include retired public servant Michel Tabet and retired Internal Security Forces General Marwan Sharbel.

